

# Editorial: Washington budget a sharp increase, but a step forward

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Washington has a budget, and it's a whopper.

The \$38.2 billion for the next two years is a 12 percent increase over the budget that sustained state operations up to midnight last night, June 30, the end of the fiscal year.

The numbers are eye-opening, but Washington had some catching up to do on schools, mental health and home care.

The state's steadily if slowly improving economy will cover the expenditures by generating additional taxes, which will be supplemented by the elimination of a few tax loopholes that kick in about \$185 million. That is, unless the courts decide sales taxes applied to goods purchased by clicking through another website, i.e. [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), are illegal.

Legislators also adjusted taxes on marijuana, with the expectation revenues will grow by \$300 million.

A proposed capital gains tax died, leaving Washington with a tax system that weighs more heavily on the poor than that of any other state.

But many middle-class Washington families did get some tax relief by way of tuition rollbacks at the state's public universities and colleges. Tuition increased an average 37 percent from 2008 to 2013, when a two-year freeze was imposed. Over the next two years, tuition at the four-year schools will fall 20 percent, and 15 percent at community colleges.

College students who enrolled two years ago and are on track to graduate in four years will have an experience perhaps unique in the recent history of higher education in the United States: lower tuition at graduation than matriculation.

K-12 students will benefit, too, although not enough to satisfy the teachers union or Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn, who is already calling on the Washington Supreme Court to rule this budget does not meet the state's paramount duty to amply fund public education. That's the standard set in the state constitution, and one which the court said the state has not been attaining in its 2012 McCleary decision.

School employees do get a 3 percent cost-of-living adjustment over two years, and a one-time 1.8 percent bump. COLAs had been suspended for six years.

But appropriating an additional \$1.3 billion for education does not resolve the fundamental problem with school funding in Washington: over-reliance on local levies that the state's richest communities are better able to afford. By one estimate, squaring up levies would cost a Seattle homeowner \$500 more per year in property taxes.

Legislators also chose to ignore the Initiative 1351 requirement that class sizes be reduced for grades 4 and up. Compliance would have added about \$2 billion in costs.

The court gave the Legislature extra time to comply with McCleary, or risk fines for contempt. A hearing, when it comes, could be a doozy based on Dorn's statement and another from the Washington Education Association.

There's more to learn about this budget, and more to say. It will move Washington forward, something that could not always be said of recent budgets.

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